

AUSTRALIA TOO FAR AWAY

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documenta 12 magazines: How does documenta gain access to specific knowledge in the world? And how can it communicate this knowledge? http://www.documenta12.de/magazine.html?&L=1_22/5/2007

The website reads,

documenta is regarded as the most important exhibition of contemporary art, drawing attention from all over the world. It was initiated in 1955 by the artist and art educator, Arnold Bode, in Kassel. After the period of Nazi dictatorship, it was supposed to reconcile German public life with international modernity and also confront it with its own failed Enlightenment.

Nobody would have thought at that time... the exhibition, often called the Hundred Day Museum, would become an unparalleled success... The singular character of the exhibition has been preserved. Every five years, a new director is chosen and the exhibition is reinvented, a concept which to date has been affirmed by the public's interest.

Under continually changing directorship and in the equally leisurely and inexorable rhythm of five years, documenta has advanced to become an authoritative worldwide seismograph of contemporary art. At documenta it becomes manifest whether art is succeeding in grasping the world in images and whether these images have validity for its public.

The artistic director of documenta 12 is Roger Buerger... together with the art historian, Ruth Noack as curator, he will, in line with documenta's pretensions, show art from the most various regions of the world and in all conceivable media. The works should not to be shown (sic) simply unrelated to each other in a row, but be put into relationship with each other.

The leitmotifs: three questions posed for art but also for its public:

To initiate such a productive exchange, documenta poses three questions for art, and also for its public—Is humanity able to recognise a common horizon beyond

all differences? Is art the medium for this knowledge? What is to be done, what do we have to learn in order to cope intellectually and spiritually with globalisation? Is that a question of aesthetic education and cultivation? What constitutes life when everything is subtracted which does not belong essentially to life? Does art help us out to get through to what is essential?

These leitmotifs and questions, which influence the curatorial process, require a resonance space already in the lead-up to the exhibition, on both a local and an international level, which will be generated by (two) documenta 12 projects:

documenta 12 magazines—a platform and three issues:

The documenta 12 magazines will provide an interested public with the knowledge required to be able to move competently and therefore leisurely through the space of the exhibition. (Roger Buerger)

One important project of the exhibition are (sic) the documenta 12 magazines, a magazine of magazines, under the direction of the Viennese art publicist, Georg Schöllhammer. More than seventy periodicals, magazines and online media from all over the world will enter into a dialogue. They will discuss and reflect the topics and theses of the exhibition. They will react to them and question them on the basis of their particular knowledge.

BROADSHEET INTERVIEWS THE DOCUMENTA 12 MAGAZINES PROJECT CURATOR, GEORG SCHÖLLHAMMER:

Broadsheet: The documenta 12 magazine project is an innovative undertaking for the documenta enterprise—can you tell us the aim of this project?

Schöllhammer: Over the next two years, *documenta 12* will work together with more than seventy print and online periodicals throughout the world. These journals and magazines will discuss the main themes and theories behind *documenta 12* with particular emphasis being placed on reflecting the interests and specific knowledge of the respective local contexts entering into a dialogue with *documenta 12*. These debates will be compiled and published in a series of publications. This 'journal of journals', so to speak, will represent a forum for the contemporary aesthetic discourse. This platform will in turn also form part of the *documenta 12* exhibition in Kassel.

Broadsheet: Could you outline the context of the magazine project, and its structure and sequence?

Schöllhammer: Art magazines and journals represent a central interface between the production, discussion and criticism of art. Various positions taken in the discourse are developed here and subjected to ongoing discussion. These periodicals thus play an important role in translating such positions into terms that can be understood and made use of by either a specific audience or a broader public. The journal, and more specifically the art and culture journal, is a medium uniquely devoted to reflecting the relationships between art and theory and between art and the public, as well as dealing with the issues involved in artistic practice and theoretical work.

With this project, the *documenta 12* will enter into a dialogue with journals worldwide. The means by which this dialogue will take place can be understood within the context of how it will relate to local configurations and translocal intentions. Not the size of the medium is significant here, but rather its relevance. The project will therefore spread its activities among media of different sizes, ranging from micropublications in relatively uncommon languages to leading transnational media, with the aspiration of becoming a platform for the transfer and discursive consolidation of specialised knowledge.

The project will begin with a research phase in which an editorial team made up of local experts is drafting a mapping of discourse-relevant journals and their positioning. This editorial team will act as a curatorial network, selecting potential partners to serve as authors for the project, and encouraging their participation and progress.

Editors, critics, theorists and artists will then take part in workshops and electronic working symposia in which the conceptual and theoretical leitmotifs of the various issues of *documenta 12* magazine will be developed in the form of a dialogue. Each of the journals participating in the network will devote an article or text, section or even an entire issue to one of the themes, utilising various formats—interviews and essays, features and fiction. By virtue of the autonomous editorial departments participating in the project, the discourse will already be embedded in the local context and conveyed to the corresponding public. It will thus be able to reach very specific audiences all over the world. This will also ensure that disparate local and editorial approaches become discernible.

The texts and contexts, as well as the discussions in the workshops and in the individual journals will form the basic material used to put together the *documenta 12* magazine. This material will be supplemented with pivotal texts on the concept and context of *documenta 12*. Each publication will thus offer a general introduction to one of the core themes of *documenta 12*, providing a reader that addresses not only a specialist public, but the interest layperson as well.

Opposite: the 'global reach' of participating magazines, from documenta's website

The first issue of the *documenta 12 magazine* will be published in spring/summer of 2006 appearing in German and English. An online magazine along with a print-on-demand tool will make it available in other world languages as well, such as Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic and French.

Broadsheet: Could you articulate the main aims of the magazine project?

Schöllhammer: Every response to a question, every theoretical debate, will raise a whole series of further issues—What does cultural transmission mean? Where are the boundaries between theoretical assumptions and actual aesthetic practice? What form do discourses take in alleged centres as opposed to putative peripheral areas? Which shifts in thematic emphasis and changes in paradigm can be ascertained between various disciplines? How does the concept of artistic work differ from other kinds of work, if at all? How does artistic theory differ from practice, and from other kinds of texts, for example from literature and politics, etc.?

documenta 12 magazines will open up a lasting dialogue. The project is not about a theoretical self-appraisal carried out by *documenta 12* itself, but rather about the process of developing theories of *documenta 12* and juxtaposing these with ideas currently circulating in the art discourse and among artists in the international, local or other specific contexts. The point of the project is thus not the role played by discourses in artistic practice, but instead the discursive practice itself, with its media, dialects and transformations in various contexts. Since the project is based in particular on transregional themes and motifs, it can help to elucidate the differences and similarities between local dimensions of aesthetic practice.

With information being transmitted directly to particular scenes and editorial departments, it will be possible to involve precisely those persons and audiences around the world who are interested in three relevant issues in exhibition work. Another objective is to gain broader insights into present-day transformative processes—What kinds of mentalities have evolved in various regions? What kinds of discussions are taking place on the changes occurring in the various economic, social, intellectual and artistic milieus? Which impulses can be derived for the international discourse from these regional self-concepts?

An important aim of the network is to provide a broader forum in which authors, theorists and artists who work on the local implementation of discursive practices can expound on their experiences, and compare these experiences with those of people in other situations and contexts.

The creation of long-term international cooperations and excellence networks beyond the scope of the project itself should provide inspiration and ideas for local and regional cultural milieus. The project will also endeavour to open up new channels for independent distribution networks, and to encourage flexible forms of translocal communication. Particularly interesting here will be the long-term effects of the project well beyond the period of *documenta 12* itself, such as the development of sustainable information infrastructures, databases and other communication tools.

Though these are the words of Georg Schöllhammer this interview never took place. His spiel has been sourced directly from the *documenta* website. *Broadsheet* did meet with Schöllhammer in June, 2006 during the *Biennale of Sydney* and again in September, 2006 during the *Singapore Biennale*, followed by countless email requests for both an interview and further information regarding Australian participation.

Roger Buergel on the *documenta* website,

For documenta 12 magazine more than eighty journals, magazines and online media worldwide... have been invited to discuss the exhibition's guiding questions. Since spring 2006, art journals as well as specialised publications from language-areas away from the big artistic centres have been publishing pieces of many kinds—essays, interviews, photoessays, features and faction. The documenta 12 magazine, a journal of journals, summarises these debates along with their central texts and images... In order to write the history of contemporary art today, it is no longer possible to be a traveling (sic) correspondent shuttling back and forth between New York and Berlin or London and Paris. Fortunately, the idea of a contemporary art that is dominated by the two or three western centres is beginning to disappear. Today there are many artistic centres, and art speaks different dialects in each of them. That is why we have asked experts in these dialects—authors and critics, curators and artists who write, all of whom work locally on the editorial staffs of large and small media outlets—to develop, entirely independently of us, their own view of the central leitmotifs of documenta 12 and then to discuss them with us.

The following present a fraction of the participating magazines tabled on the *documenta* website. But while at the most distant the project is from downtown Kassel the more virtual are the participants, the following are from the neighbourhood—from Southeast (and Northeast) Asia: *CLiCK*, Yogyakarta; *Ctrl+P*, Manila; *FOCAS*, Singapore; *Kakiseni.com*, Kuala Lumpur; *kalam*, Jakarta; *Off the Edge*, Kuala Lumpur; *Sarai*, Delhi; *sentAp!*, Ipoh (Malaysia); *talawas*, Hanoi; *Thai Bookazine*, Bangkok; *Yishu*, Vancouver (and Taiwan); *Art China*, Shanghai; *Art World*, Shanghai; *Dushu*, Beijing; *Urban China*, Shanghai; *Frontiers*, Haikou; *AIDA*, Tokyo; *ART iT*, Tokyo; *diatxt*, Kyoto; *journal BOL*, Seoul.

documenta sees itself as “the most important exhibition of contemporary art in the world”, and especially with the magazine project (supposedly) engaging “every region in the world... (and) areas away from the big artistic centres”, one might consider this pretense given its overt incapacity, like the omnipotent Church in pre-Galileo days, to embrace the reality over the horizon, despite its nodding and winking at being global.

There may well be “many artistic centres” in the world according to Buergel, but examining the full list of magazines it is quite apparent that given there is no hardcopy Australasian participant, this part of the world appears not to be one of them, despite his utterance of (embracing) “areas away from the big artistic centres”. While there are three ‘listings’, two are online and the other (at the time of writing) seemed to only exist in *documenta*’s imagination—the only google result for it was on *documenta*’s own website. Of the other two, *Natural Selection* is an online magazine based in Auckland, which encourages “writers to interpret the ‘Australasian art reviews’ brief as loosely as they wish... and to not back off being nepotistic, poetic, fictional, theoretical, uncertain, epic, lyric, microscopic, or out of sight/date”, while *empyre* is “an Australian based global community which preserves its autonomy as a non-hierarchical collaborative entity... (which) facilitates critical perspectives on contemporary cross-disciplinary issues, practices and events in networked media”.

As for magazines “worldwide” joining in the dialogue to discuss the *documenta*’s leitmotifs, one might rightly feel an impulse to question why such dialogue does not involve the Australasian region. *Natural Selection* and *empyre* might both be self-consciously pleased to be associated, but neither is overt hardcopy on the surface of the cultural landscape and the latter’s ‘language’ is a clear indication as to the audience marginality of both. The *empyre* website event states “this site has not been updated substantially since Melinda Rackham left to take up the Directorship of ANAT in late 2005.” Australia and New Zealand’s lack of ‘dialogue contribution’ therefore may be seen in contrast to that of our Asian neighbours, which (as listed) collectively are surprisingly well represented, given their fragmented and disconnected platform of contemporary critical visual art publishing. As part of *documenta*’s project development process, regional seminars and transregional meetings were held between editors, authors and artists of participating magazines in Hong Kong, Delhi, Sao Paulo, Cairo, New York and Johannesburg. Research was carried out worldwide, including Southeast Asia. Keiko Sei, Bangkok based writer and curator, was commissioned to research and build up a network of publications in the Southeast Asian region—with forums held in Chiang Mai and Singapore. But her boundary only extended as far as the Arafura Sea.

In contradiction to *documenta*’s lofty rhetoric of global pretensions—“emphasis being placed on reflecting the interests and specific knowledge of the respective local contexts... discourse will... be embedded in the local context and conveyed to the corresponding public... thus be able to reach very specific audiences all over the world”—is the non-participation of an Australasian hardcopy magazine ‘entering into a local dialogue’ with “regional cultural milieus”. Roger Buergel, visiting Australia in June 2006, when interviewed by *The Australian*’s Rosalie Higson, lamented, “I’m on the road now for over a month. I started in Beijing, and when you move yourself to Taipei, where all those treasures from the forbidden cities are, to Thailand and Indonesia, you realise how all those geographies connect... When I boarded the plane for Sydney at Singapore I was quite sad because my natural inclination would be to go north to Calcutta. I had prejudices about Australia and its remoteness...”. It would seem not only Buergel suffers from prejudice; together with his colleague Schöllhammer, the *documenta 12 magazine project* appears to present, once its gaze has transcended its own horizon, an arrogant Northern lingering for an exotic Orient—with Australia too far away.